

# British and American Drama After 1945

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- Introduction
  - Post-war American drama
  - 1956 and all that in Great Britain
  - “Solitaire” playwrights
  - Playwrights of emancipation
  - In-yer-face and other later developments

# Introduction

## Influences of pre-WWII drama

- USA

Broadway

Eugene O'Neill

### Great Britain

Bernard Shaw

The well-made play tradition (Coward, Rattigan)

# Definitions (genres, styles)

- Theatre of the Absurd: theatre that presents the world as unknowable, random and unpredictable.
- Community Theatre: often performed in places where people gather to socialise, dealing with local and community issues using local people as actors.

Poetic Drama: plays written in verse form.

Documentary theatre: a drama involving actual documentary and verbatim materials (such as transcripts of historical speeches).

# Post-war American drama

Arthur Miller

Tennessee Williams

Edward Albee

# A. Miller 1915-2005

- The moral imperative
  - 1949: *All My Sons*
  - 1949: *Death of a Salesman*
  - 1953: *The Crucible*



CHARLEY: Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.

BIFF: Charley, the man didn't know who he was.

HAPPY [...]: All right, boy. I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have—to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him

(Miller: *Death of a Salesman*, Requiem)

# T. Williams 1911-1983

- the intimate South
  - 1944: *The Glass Menagerie*
  - 1947: *A Streetcar Named Desire*
  - 1955: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*



[...] *The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation. The fire-escape is included in the set - that is, the landing of it and steps descending from it.*

*The scene is memory and is therefore non-realistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic licence. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. The interior is therefore rather dim and poetic. [...]*

**TOM:** Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.

To begin with, I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy. [...] The play is memory.

Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. [...]

I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother Amanda, my sister Laura and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes.

(Williams: *The Glass Menagerie*, opening lines)



# E. Albee 1928-

- American Absurdist drama
  - 1958: *The Zoo Story*
  - 1962: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
  - 2002: *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*



STEVIE        Tell me! Tell me!

MARTIN       Her name is Sylvia!

STEVIE        Sylvia? Who is Sylvia?

MARTIN       She's a goat; Sylvia is a goat! (*Acting manner dropped; normal tone now; serious, flat*) She's a goat.

STEVIE        (*Long pause; she stares, finally smiles. She giggles, chortles, moves toward the hall; normal tone*) You're too much! (*Exits*)

MARTIN       I am? (*Shrugs; to himself*) You try to tell them; you try to be honest. What do they do? They laugh at you. [...]

(Albee - *The Goat; or, Who Is Sylvia?* Scene 1.)

# Great Britain: 1956 and after

- Foreign influences

  - Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett

  - The Royal Court Theatre

    - John Osborne: *Look Back in Anger* (1956)

    - kitchen-sink realism

    - social themes

    - 1963: National Theatre opens

- 1968: abolition of censorship

JIMMY: Have you ever seen her brother? Brother Nigel? The straight-backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst? I only met him once myself. He asked me to step outside when I told his mother she was evil minded.

CLIFF: And did you?

JIMMY: Certainly not. He's a big chap. Well, you've never heard so many well-bred commonplaces come from beneath the same bowler hat. The Platitude from Outer Space—that's brother Nigel. He'll end up in the Cabinet one day, make no mistake. But somewhere at the back of that mind is the vague knowledge that he and his pals have been plundering and fooling everybody for generations. (*Going upstage, and turning.*) [...] Besides, he's a patriot and an Englishman, and he doesn't like the idea that he may have been selling out his countryman all these years, so what does he do? The only thing he can do—seek sanctuary in his own stupidity. [...] Don't you worry, he'll make it. And, what's more, he'll do it better than anybody else!

*There is no sound, only the plod of Alison's iron. Her eyes are fixed on what she is doing. Cliff stares at the floor. His cheerfulness has deserted him for the moment. Jimmy is rather shakily triumphant. [...]*

(*conversationally*) Yes, that's the little woman's family. You know Mummy and Daddy, of course. And don't let the Marquess of Queensbury manner fool you. They'll kick you in the groin while you're handing your hat to the maid.

(Osborne: *Look Back in Anger*, act 1)

# “Solitaire” playwrights (GB)

- Harold Pinter
  - Tom Stoppard
- Michael Frayn  
Martin Crimp

# H. Pinter 1930-2008

- Theatre of the absurd (Pinter's comedy of menace)
  - 1957: *The Birthday Party*
- memory plays
  - 1978: *Betrayal*
- political plays
  - 1996: *Ashes to Ashes*



In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.'

This sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and the other writers discussed in this book. But it is not merely the subject-matter that defines what is here called the Theatre of the Absurd. [...]

The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.

(Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 22-23)

*[The two characters sit at opposite sides of a kitchen table in a house that seems to belong to their dead employer. Beth, in her late 40s, never looks at Duff. Neither appears to hear the other's voice.]*

DUFF: ... I thought you would come into my arms and kiss me, even .. Offer yourself to me. I would have had you in front of the dog, like a man, in the hall, on the stone, banging the gong, mind you don't get the scissors up your arse, or the thimble, don't worry, I'll throw them for the dog to chase, the thimble will keep the dog happy, he'll play with it with his paws, you'll plead with me like a woman, I'll bang the gong on the floor, if the sound is too flat, lacks resonance, I'll hang it back on its hoko, bang you against it swiging, gonging, waking the place up, calling them all for diner, lunch is up, bring out the bacon, bang your lovely head, mind the dog doesn't swallow the thimble, slam - *(silence)*

BETH: He lay above me and looked down at me. He supported my shoulder. *(pause)* So tender his touch on my neck. So softly his kiss on my cheek. *(pause)* My hand on his rib. *(pause)* So sweetly the sand over me. Tiny the sand on my skin. *(pause)* So silent the sky in my eyes. Gently the sound of the tide. *(pause)* Oh my true love I said.

(Pinter: *Landscape* (1968): closing lines)



# T. Stoppard 1937-

- Absurdity, comedy ... and politics
  - 1966: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*
  - 1968: *The Real Inspector Hound*
  - 1972: *Jumpers*
  - 1993: *Arcadia*
  - 2002: *The Coast of Utopia*
  - 2006: *Rock'n'Roll*
  - 2015: *The Hard Problem*
  - 2020: *Leopoldstadt*



ROSENCRANTZ: Heads. Heads. Heads. Heads. Heads.

GUILDENSTERN: There is an art to the building up of suspense.

ROS: Heads. [...]

GUIL: A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability.

ROS: Heads.

GUIL (musing) : The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted, is something to do with the proposition that if six monkeys (he has surprised himself) ... if six monkeys were .. .

ROS: Game?

GUIL: Were they?

ROS: Are you?

GUIL (understanding): Game. (Flips a coin.) The law of averages, if I have got this right, means that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air for long enough they would land on their tails about as often as they would land on their ---

ROS: Heads.

Tom Stoppard: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (opening scene)

THOMASINA: When you stir your rice pudding, Septimus, the spoonful of jam spreads itself round making red trails like the picture of a meteor in my astronomical atlas. But if you stir backward, the jam will not come together again. Indeed, the pudding does not notice and continues to turn pink just as before. Do you think this is odd?

SEPTIMUS: No.

THOMASINA: well, I do. You cannot stir things apart.

SEPTIMUS: No more you can, time must needs run backward, and since it will not, we must stir our way onward mixing as we go, disorder out of disorder into disorder until pink is complete, unchanging and unchangeable, and we are done with it forever. This is known as free will or self-determination.

Tom Stoppard: *Arcadia* 1.1

# M. Frayn 1933-

- reinventing the farce
  - 1977: *Alphabetical Order*
  - 1982: *Noises Off*
- historical plays
  - 1998: *Copenhagen*
  - 2003: *Democracy*



# M. Crimp 1956-

- theatre language revisions
  - 1993: *The Treatment*
  - 1997: *Attempts on Her Life*
  - 2005: *Fewer Emergencies*



- It's quite clear that her mind's / made up.
- It's not a cry for help. It's very important to establish that, wouldn't you agree, from the outset. It's very important to establish that no one could've helped / her at that point.
- No one could've helped her - not her Mum - not her Dad - and certainly none of her so-called / friends.
- She wouldn't've / wanted help.
- Help is the last thing she would've wanted.

*(silence - in the silence):*

She enjoys spending lots of time with guests,  
And gets a feeling of great satisfaction  
When everyone is having a good time.  
She says there are lots of hugs at the station  
When it's time to go home, with holidaymakers  
waving and calling out  
See you next time, from the train window

*(Laughter all through next passage):*

- Some of the strange things she says...
- Some of the strange things she says to her Mum and Dad as a child...

*(Crimp: Attempts on her Life, scenario 6)*

# USA

- D. Mamet 1947-
- dialogue as fiction
  - 1975: *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*
  - 1977: *American Buffalo*
  - 1984: *Glengarry Glen Ross*





# Playwrights of emancipation

- USA:

African American playwrights

Lorraine Hansberry

August Wilson

GLBT, Feminist playwrights

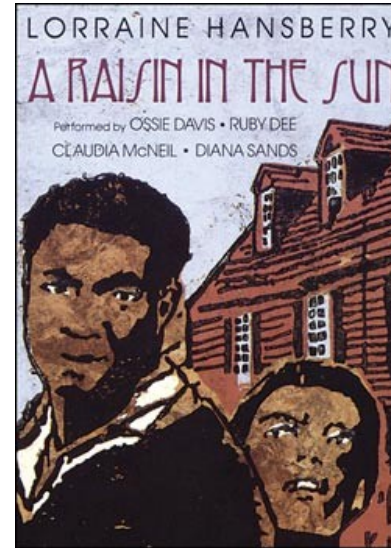
Tony Kushner

V (Eve Ensler)



# L. Hansberry 1930-1965

- 1959: *A Raisin in the Sun*



# A. Wilson 1945-2005

- A chronicler of African Americans in Pittsburgh

- *The Twentieth Century Cycle*

- The Piano Lesson*

- Fences*



# Tony Kushner 1956-

- 1993: *Angels in America*



# V (Eve Ensler) 1953-

1996: *The Vagina Monologues*



# Playwrights of emancipation

- GB:
  - feminist authors

Pam Gems 1925-2011

1977: *Queen Christina*, 1978: *Piaf*

Caryl Churchill 1938-

1982: *Top Girls*



NIJO. There was nothing in my life, nothing, without the Emperor's favour. The Empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three-layered gowns. / But I was the adopted daughter of my grandfather the Prime Minister. I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk.

JOAN. There was nothing in my life except my studies. I was obsessed with pursuit of the truth. I taught at the Greek School in Rome, which St Augustine had made famous. I was poor, I worked hard. I spoke apparently brilliantly, I was still very young, I was a stranger; suddenly I was quite famous, I was everyone's favourite. Huge crowds came to hear me. The day after they made me cardinal I fell ill and lay two weeks without speaking, full of terror and regret. / But then I got up

MARLENE. Yes, success is very ...

JOAN. Determined to go on. I was seized again / with a desperate longing for the absolute.

ISABELLA. Yes, yes, to go on. I sat in Tobermory among Hennie's flowers and sewed a complete outfit in Jaeger flannel. / I was fifty-six years old.

NIJO. Out of favour but I didn't die. I left on foot, nobody saw me go. For the next twenty years I walked through Japan.

GRET. Walking is good.

*The WAITRESS enters.*

JOAN. Pope Leo died and I was chosen. All right then. I would be Pope. I would know God. I would know everything.

ISABELLA. I determined to leave my grief behind and set off for Tibet.

MARLENE. Magnificent all of you. We need some more wine, please, two bottles I think, Griselda isn't even here yet, and I want to drink a toast to you all.

(Churchill: *Top Girls*, Act 1)

# In-yer-face and other developments

- Aesthetics of intensity

Anthony Neilson 1967-

1991: *Normal: The Düsseldorf Ripper*

Mark Ravenhill 1966-

1996: *Shopping and Fucking*

Sarah Kane 1971-1999

1995: *Blasted*

2000 (sic): *4.48 Psychosis*



# Verbatim drama

- *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) - Robin Soans
- *My Country: A Work in Progress* (2017) - Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris



# Thank you!

Time for Q & A